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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT EMPOWERS WOMEN, WARNS SEX TOURISTS

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¶1. SUMMARY: October was a groundbreaking month for women in Madagascar. Following the designation of the first ever female Minister of Defense (REF A), President Ravalomanana kicked off the opening conference of the Presidential Initiative on Women and Leadership with a sweeping speech calling on women to assume greater leadership across the board. Asserting that gender roles must change to keep up with Madagascar's overall transformation, President Ravalomanana made women's empowerment critical to the success of the Madagascar Action Plan (MAP) for development (REF B). He outlined the Government of Madagascar's (GOM) goals for family planning and micro-credit programs and issued a stern warning to would-be sex tourists to stay away. END SUMMARY.

¶2. On October 29, the President opened the three-day conference that brought together 3,000 women from the country's 22 regions with a sweeping speech calling for change and women's empowerment across the board. Calling the development of women's leadership capacity essential to the success of the MAP, he invited women to "work with me to get results - big results" by forming organizations to champion women's rights, changing men's mindsets, studying leadership and management, and participating in Parliament and civic affairs. "Go out and get elected [in the December 12 municipal elections], and show your local community and the nation that sometimes women can lead even better than men!" The President identified four major challenges women face in Madagascar. First, men and women must have equal job opportunities. Second, he stressed the need to educate women on family planning in order to meet the GOM's objective of three to four children per family to minimize social, economic and environmental strain. Third, he asserted that all children, particularly girls, need to go to school and stay through university level if possible; it is "not a good thing" when parents keep their children out of school in order to work to feed the family. Fourth, citing how traditional forms of discrimination lead to a bias against women obtaining credit or owning assets, he has directed the GOM to develop a micro-finance program aimed at helping women set up small businesses.

¶3. Lamenting the role parental encouragement has played in the alarming growth in prostitution, he cautioned, "All parents, all community leaders - in the government and the church - must help stop prostitution and help these young women to go to school or find jobs." Issuing a stern warning to would-be sex tourists, he said, "To the foreigners who come here looking for young girls, I say change your behavior." He noted a severe law will be passed and enforced to rein in sex tourism.

¶4. COMMENT: With his closing line, "The world is changing, Madagascar is changing, and the roles of men and women are changing -- and this is a good thing," President Ravalomanana squarely placed

women's empowerment in his larger agenda to transform and align Madagascar with the more developed world. At the head of a largely traditional society, this President's time in office has been characterized by rapid change requiring huge shifts in cultural mentality and greater personal leadership across the board. Ravalomanana himself, while making the bold move of naming a woman as Defense Minister, did not raise the overall proportion of women in his new cabinet (3 out of 19). Still, Post hopes this high-level push will result in greater attention to women's issues within the GOM. END COMMENT.

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